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Recommended Citation

"Marketing in the Digital Age" (2014). *News Releases*. 2879.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/2879

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Marketing in the Digital Age

02.26.2014 | Business, Students

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A digital marketing course at the University of Dayton is linking digital natives with local businesses, helping bring in new customers while creating job opportunities.

The course pairs teams of junior and senior business majors with small-business clients to develop digital marketing strategies — using social media, search engine optimization (SEO), websites, analytics and mobile.

The program — known as UDevelop Digital Marketing Strategy — is managed by Aileron, a local nonprofit offering private-business consulting, and is free to local businesses.

"Many small businesses find it difficult to stay on top of rapidly changing technology and are unprepared to capitalize on the opportunities digital marketing provides," reads the description of the program on Aileron's website. "Now, small businesses can gain perspective (and a digital marketing strategy they can implement) from a group of individuals who are living the digital lifestyle every day."

University of Dayton marketing lecturer Irene Dickey, who teaches the course, launched the program with Aileron in 2008. She said it made sense to connect the learning in the classroom with real-world scenarios, and it has become a win-win for students and businesses. Students gain relevant skills that are highly valuable, such as project management, teamwork and earning a certification in Google analytics, she added.

The program is simple: A team of four to five students is paired with a local business client. The students familiarize themselves with the company and the customers and then schedule an initial meeting where the client gives the team digital marketing objectives. The team meets with the client two or three more times in the semester and puts together a final presentation with their analysis, recommendation and implementation strategy.

No final exam, just the final presentation. Both the client and Dickey award a grade, but the real measure of success is a satisfied customer. The job opportunities are a nice bonus, too.

"Most of our clients report an increase in traffic to their websites, increased opt-in to calls to action, higher search engine results and more," Dickey said. "And with every final presentation we give to clients, we offer students as interns who can implement the plans."

Local entrepreneur Marty Grunder, CEO of Marty Grunder Inc., took advantage of the offer after participating in the program three years ago. He hired one of the students as an intern and plans to hire him full-time when he graduates this May.

"I didn't know anything about social media when I met with the student team," Grunder said. "Today, I have a following on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. As a small-business guy with a narrow niche, I'm happy with the results."

"The nice thing about working with students is they don't have prejudices about how things are done; everything is new to them. They don't know what won't work, and they come up with ideas that make you think. This program is also a great way for employers to test-drive potential employees and to keep our local graduates in the Dayton area."

The program also gives students an edge in the job market. The experience helped Mark Zimmerman, a senior entrepreneurship major from London, Ohio, nab a job offer recently from a national digital marketing consultancy "because I was able to talk the industry jargon and show I had real-world experience," he said.

"The most rewarding part was being able to actually help the client and give them usable insight into how they can develop and improve their digital marketing strategies," Zimmerman said.

Able to take on just 10 clients a semester, Dickey said the UDevelop program has built up a waiting list. As demand increases,

the department is considering adding another section of the course and opening it to more students and small businesses.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.